

Paul's [Saul's] conversion – A Few Thoughts

The conversion of Paul (more appropriately Saul of Tarsus) is often referred to as his “Damascus Road experience.” There is much to learn by his conversion and the circumstances associated with it. That ostensibly mysterious event on an ancient Middle Eastern road, has left us with a Spirit-inspired legacy of some thirteen recorded epistles that continue to challenge and convict all who read them.

Its circumstance

Paul's conversion was a dramatic “about face” in his spiritual direction. In its manner it was unique as one born out of due season. There, on the Damascus Road while pursuing his relentless persecution of the Christians, he had a life-changing encounter with the once crucified but now risen and glorified Man – Jesus of Nazareth.¹

“And Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went unto the high priest, And desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues, that if he found any of this way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem. And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven: And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutes” (Acts 9:1-5).

Paul responded: “And he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do” (v 6).

There are a number of things to note here.

First, at this instant, arrested by the glory of that heavenly light, Paul realised that the once crucified Jesus of Nazareth was in heaven. This is of great moment. An ascended and glorified Christ means that everything that He did and said on earth concerning His person and work was vindicated by God. Paul knew very well what this meant. The words and works of Christ had been widely proclaimed by the disciples among the Jews and, doubtless, listed in his prosecuting brief from his peers: that Christ is the Son of God; that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ; that He died and arose; that “neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved” (cf Acts 9:10-12). It comes as no surprise then, that this heavenly vision and voice moved Paul to bow low to Christ as Lord and Saviour. In this, his conversion took on a heavenly character which

¹ See Appendix B

pervaded his life and inspired his epistles, while cultivating his steadfast obedience to Christ. “Whereupon, O king Agrippa, I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision” (Acts 26:19). His obedience to the heavenly vision lies at the heart of his Gospel message and anchors his apologetics that celebrate the liberty in Christ over the beggarly bondage under the law.

There are two verses that especially define the substance of Paul’s conversion on that Damascus Road.

“That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation” (Rom 10:9-10).²

Its confession

“And he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do. And the men which journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice, but seeing no man. And Saul arose from the earth; and when his eyes were opened, he saw no man: but they led him by the hand, and brought him into Damascus” (vv 6-8).

No rebellion or faltering here! Paul was willing to be led. What a reversal in his mind and will! He had no hesitation in surrendering his life to Christ as His Lord. As with Paul, the confession of Christ as Lord sets the believer apart from every heathen devotee. The lordship of Christ should occupy every vestige of our lives. “And why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?” (Luke 6:46).

The “Lord Jesus”

We often hear the expressions “in Jesus’ name” and in the “in the name of Jesus” used in prayer. This is not unscriptural (Jn 14:14; 15:16). However, as believers we must not only seek to be scriptural but also to be *spiritual*.³ We should always acknowledge the divine lordship associated with the name Jesus. Has not God hath made that same Jesus both Lord and Christ? (Acts 2:36). And, will it not be so that in a coming crowning day, “every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father?” (Php 2:11). Fittingly, the Lord identified Himself to Paul using His earthly name, the name of His rejection, “I am Jesus.” But Paul, in subjection immediately confessed that same One as Lord. And so we have his exhortation, “whatsoever ye do in word or

² See Appendix A

³ The converse is an impossibility – to be spiritual and not scriptural.

deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by Him” (Col 3:17).⁴

To Paul, Jesus Christ as *Lord* was a foil to the power of Rome and of the world, because “height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:39). it was a foil to Judaism because “we also joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement [reconciliation]” (Rom 5:11); it was a foil to the wisdom of the world, through “repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ” – “both to the Jews [who seek a sign], and also to the Greeks who seek after wisdom,” (Acts 20:21). “In whom [Christ] are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col 2:3). The truth that illuminated and thrilled the hitherto darkened legal heart and mind of Paul was liberty and salvation through belief in Christ!

Its conviction

There are three aspects to this. First, after his conversion and confession, the next step in Paul’s life in and for Christ was *identification* with Him in baptism. This was obedience to the command of the Lord given in Matthew 28:19. So we read in Acts 9, that “ Ananias went his way, and entered into the house; and putting his hands on him said, Brother Saul, the Lord, even Jesus, that appeared unto thee in the way as thou camest, hath sent me, that thou mightest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost. And immediately there fell from his eyes as it had been scales: and he received sight forthwith, and arose, and was baptized” (vv 17-18).

This baptism is known as New Testament or believer’s baptism – the immersion in water and emergence from it. It is a vital step of obedience after salvation. Some say that there is no command *to be* baptised, only a command *to* baptise which is given in Matthew 28; even in the light of Acts 10:48. “And he [Peter] commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord” (Acts 10:48). Notwithstanding, the fact that the Lord commanded water baptism places an unavoidable obligation upon all who claim to own Him as Lord to be baptised.

Second, there was his *proclamation* of Christ. “And straightway he preached Christ in the synagogues, that He is the Son of God” (v 20). It was *after* his public identification with Christ in baptism and only then that he “preached Christ in the synagogues, that He is the Son of God” (v 20). Proper service for the Lord cannot begin until we are obedient in baptism. Baptism is a

⁴ John 16:23-24. “In that day ye shall ask me nothing” refers to the fact that when the Church period comes in He will not be on earth to answer their requests. “Hitherto have ye asked nothing in my name,” because He was present among them and they were to ask the Father [i.e., disciples prayer]. He then adds – “ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full....And whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son.” This anticipates the new ground that would be theirs after Calvary and after the Church has come into being. Paul takes us further along that new ground by virtue of His conversion, adding the title associated with His earthly name in exaltation – Lord.

command from the Lord Himself. “And why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?” (Luke 6:46). Of particular interest is the subject of Paul’s ministry – Christ as the Son of God. To proclaim Christ as the Son of God to the Jews was blasphemy and cause for stoning. This judgment was zealously prosecuted against the Christians by Paul as Saul of Tarsus. But he readily declared the truth concerning the *Person* with whom he had identified in baptism. That “Jesus” is the Son of God.⁵

Third, Paul sought out an *association* in Christ through fellowship with fellow Christians. In Acts 9 we have the record that “when he had received meat, he was strengthened. Then was Saul certain days with the disciples which were at Damascus. And straightway he preached Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God. But all that heard him were amazed, and said; is not this he that destroyed them which called on this name in Jerusalem, and came hither for that intent, that he might bring them bound unto the chief priests?” (vv 19–21). Later we read that “when Saul was come to Jerusalem, he assayed to join himself to the disciples: but they were all afraid of him, and believed not that he was a disciple” (Acts 9:26).

Saul of Tarsus, the raging son of Benjamin was now resting in the grace of God in Christ. His conversion and the confession created a new desire – no longer to be found within the Jewish fraternity, but to have fellowship of the saints. “Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching” (Heb 10:25). In Acts 9 we have then an account of Paul’s *conversion, confession* and *consistency* which is a pattern for assembly *reception, commendation* and *fellowship*. We also have an instructive and compelling personal pattern to follow – *conversion, baptism* and then *corporate fellowship* within the local assembly. It follows the pattern established at the beginning of the Church. “Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them [the local body] about three thousand souls. And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers” (Acts 2:41–42).⁶

Its character

The character of Paul’s conversion is determined by the fact that it began with a personal encounter with the resurrected and glorified Son of God. He was especially marked and favoured

⁵ We have a remarkable parallel in the experience of the eunuch. “Then Philip opened his mouth, and began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus. And as they went on their way, they came unto a certain water: and the eunuch said, See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized? And Philip said, If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. And he commanded the chariot to stand still: and they went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him” (Acts 8:35–38).

⁶ Act 2:47: “Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.” The adding here is to the Body of Christ – not to the local church.

in this, in order that he could bring into his epistles our blessings and responsibilities associated with an exalted Christ. It serves to remind us that the circumstances of conversion colour and construct lives for the Lord. Paul spoke of the resurrection of Christ and its power in personal life; and of the exaltation of Christ and its glories to the Church. Peter takes us into the wilderness; but it is Paul who takes us into the blessings we have in heavenly places in Christ Jesus; it is Peter who speaks of our priesthood; but it is Paul who speaks of us as members of the Body and Bride.

We have, in Paul's conversion, the first intimation of the Church as the "Body of Christ." It is "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou *me*?" The Church (comprising all the redeemed in Christ in this dispensation) is figured in a number of ways in Scripture, such as a building, a temple and a bride. Here we have the figure of a body; "bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh" (Gen 2:23). It is in regard to this last figure that the Gospel is brought out in all its redeeming mercy and blessing. It is able to reach, save and secure one who by his own confession, was "a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious" and chief among sinners (1 Tim 1:13; 15). "But I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief." When Paul was arrested by the risen Christ on that Damascus road, it was as a man who was ignorant and unbelieving. How reminiscent of the Lord's plea from the cross, "Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do!" (Luke 23:34).

Despite his monstrous deeds Saul obtained mercy because he did them not knowing the truth regarding Christ. It is another lot however for the *wilful* rejecter, who has known and seen the operation of divine grace yet turns away from it. "For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, and have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, If they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame" (Heb 6:4-6).⁷

Finally, we remark that while it was a heavenly voice and vision that arrested the conscience and conduct of Saul, there is no warrant to expect this to be the way of things today. Despite his experience here and later being taken up to the third heaven, Paul never preached a Gospel of voices, visions or experiences. It was not the vision that saved Paul (although he told Agrippa that he was "not disobedient to the heavenly vision" in regard to his commission to preach the Gospel (Acts 26:19)). He alone had heard a voice – the convicting *words* of the Lord (the others a sound).⁸

⁷ It is "enlightenment," "tasting" and "partaking" and not receiving as in conversion and salvation. This passage refers to the false teachers and professors who take their stand within the professing Church and then deny all that they have seen and heard – apostasy.

⁸ In Acts 22:9 Paul says, "but they heard not the voice of him that spake to me." Is there a contradiction with Acts 9:7? "And the men which journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice, but seeing no man." No contradiction exists because the word

So Paul could say as a result of this encounter, “faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Rom 10:17). This is our course today. The Bible – God’s written Word is our only path to faith, along with the work of the Spirit of God who was sent to convict of sin, righteousness and of judgment. The subsequent blindness that befell Paul was to cultivate his dependence upon the One whom he had called and owned as “Lord.”

Its conflict

“But Saul increased the more in strength, and confounded the Jews which dwelt at Damascus, proving that this is very Christ. And after that many days were fulfilled, the Jews took counsel to kill him. But their laying await was known of Saul. And they watched the gates day and night to kill him. Then the disciples took him by night, and let him down by the wall in a basket” (vv 22-25).

Our confession of Christ, a conviction in baptism and even corporate fellowship brings conflict. Conflict and opposition is a mark of the presence of obedience in the child of God. It was the experience of the Lord and it will be the reality for His faithful disciples. In verse 19 of Acts 9 we have a direct application to Paul. “I will shew him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake.” It is the name that carries the legacy of Christ on earth in His absence and heavenly exaltation. That is why we gather unto it, as *Christians* not holding any other name (cf Phpp 2).

Paul’s conflict we know came not only from the Jews but also from within. It is a sobering reminder that those who seek to hold fast the things that remain will often have their most strident critics and conflict from within the professing Church. May we all be encouraged by the words of Paul to Timothy, his son in the faith. “I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith” (2 Tim 4:7).

Its confidence

“For the which cause I also suffer these things: nevertheless I am not ashamed: for I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that He is able to keep that which I have committed unto Him against that day” (2 Tim 1:12). The Person is of course the glorified Man Jesus of Nazareth, the One Paul encountered on the Damascus road. To Him Paul entrusted or deposited for safe keeping his body soul and spirit, as well as his personal testimony against that day. What day is this? It can

phōnē (voice) can be used in two different senses. One generically refers to a “sound” like a voice, and the other refers to a sound which is identified by actual speech – a “voice.” In John 3:8 we have the generic sense. “The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound [*phōnē*] thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit.” In Acts 9:7 we have the contextual sense – the voice “speaking.” We have often used the expression, “I heard voices”, but did not hear what they were saying!”

only be that day when, for the believer in Christ all that is committed to Him is consummated – the day of Christ which begins with the Rapture.

Its crown and consummation

“Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing” (2 Tim 4:8). The crown here is the reward for righteousness in *life* at the Judgment Seat, a life consistent with the righteous character of the Judge, and motivated by the love of His appearing. His appearing here is His Second Advent.⁹

Appendix A – Dissenting views from within

The timing of Paul’s conversion

Some within Christendom claim that Paul was saved when the scales were removed from his eyes and his blindness lifted. The following quotation is typical of the idea.

“There is another remark to note of still more general importance, which the history of Saul's conversion brings into evidence. We must not confound, as popular preachers do, the reception of life and salvation. Life is always given immediately; not so salvation....It is a great mistake therefore to talk of "salvation in a moment," "deliverance on the spot," or any other of the stock phrases of superficial revivalism, which ignore the word of God and spring from the confusion of life with salvation. After truly looking to the person of Christ with its soul-subduing power, a deep process habitually goes on in renewed souls, who are not satisfied with "life for a look," but face the overwhelming discovery of not only all they have done, but all they are in its evil and enmity against God and His Son. Self is thus judged in the light and humiliation is produced, without which there can be no solid and settled peace. In the style of preaching referred to, this is slurred over to the danger and injury of souls, quite as much as to the slighting of the full truth so due to Christ's glory. And therein also is seen the practical importance of distinguishing the new birth of the Spirit from the gift of the Spirit.”¹⁰

It is vital to identify what is all too commonly being taught in this extract; that there is a distinction in principle and in time between *rebirth* or quickening (life) and *salvation*, and that rebirth is a *precondition* for salvation. In other words, rebirth and salvation need not take place simultaneously. There are many passages of scripture that refute this idea – some from the very passage relating to Paul’s conversion.¹¹

⁹ For an exposition on this verse refer to “An Outline of 1 Timothy 4” ribbandofblue.net

¹⁰ “The Bible Treasury” Vol. 15 p 102

¹¹ For a fuller examination of this doctrine refer to the article “Calvinism – Bitter for Sweet” ribbandofblue.net.

Paul's heart responded not so much to what he had physically seen, but to what he *heard* – the words of the risen Lord and all that they entailed. “Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?” The Lord did not ask him to repent and believe for salvation; because Paul's repentant heart in response to the Lord's question was known to the Lord and sufficient for salvation. Furthermore, we are told in Acts 9:17, that “Ananias went his way, and entered into the house; and putting his hands on him [Saul] said, Brother Saul, the Lord, even Jesus, that appeared unto thee in the way as thou camest, hath sent me, that thou mightest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost.” The “laying on of hands” which marked Ananias' identification with Saul and the seemingly insignificant expression, “brother Saul,” come before the removal of Saul's blindness. Both speak of Saul's fraternity as one in Christ with Ananias. He was saved and along with Ananias part of the Body of Christ formed at Pentecost. As one having the indwelling Spirit upon salvation (the *gift of the Spirit*) he could *then* be filled by the Spirit. It was the *filling* of the Spirit and not the gift of the Spirit which was associated with Ananias laying his hands on Saul. Saul received the indwelling or the gift of the Spirit on the Damascus road the moment he confessed Jesus as Lord. The testimony of the NT is that a person cannot be filled with the Spirit unless indwelt by the Spirit. It is also important to understand that Ananias had no power to impart a filling of the Spirit. The laying on of hands was simply an act of identification. We see how the Damascus road conversion is embedded in the polemic of the Roman epistle. “That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that *God* hath raised Him from the dead, thou shalt be saved” (Rom 10:9).

A gradual conversion?

Acts 9:5. “And he said, who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks.” Some take the statement “it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks [goads],” as evidence of a “gradual conversion.” They claim that God pricked or goaded Saul's conscience in the trial and death of Stephen – and even by the crucifixion of Christ. Paul was quite candid when He related the circumstances surrounding his conversion on the Damascus road. He made no mention of having pangs of conscience prior to it.

There is no such thing in Scripture as a “gradual” conversion. There is however, the reality of the Spirit of God striving with an unsaved person. This may raise a *conviction*, but it may not lead to conversion which is accompanied by a *confession*. This is amply illustrated in the case of Felix. “And as he [Paul] reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come, Felix trembled, and answered, Go thy way for this time; when I have a convenient season, I will call for thee” (Acts 24:25). In Paul's case, whatever prior strivings God made with him as Saul of Tarsus were resisted and did not bring a conviction, let alone a conversion and a confession. On the Damascus road conviction, conversion and confession were simultaneous.

Appendix B – A dissenting view from without

The rationalist lessens Paul's conversion to a psychological experience precipitated by a deep sense of personal guilt over his persecution of the *Christians*. This guilt they say was so profound that it produced hallucinations such as voices and visions. It is perhaps sufficient to note that the like-minded prosecutors travelling with Paul shared (albeit in a lesser way) the external phenomena, for "the men which journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice, but seeing no man" (Acts 9:7). But a few further observations are warranted in order to expose the poverty of the rationalist and demonstrate that the "foolishness of God is wiser than men" (1 Cor 1:25). "The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor 2:14).

The truth will always elude the rationalist who fails to correctly consult the Word of God. Paul did not speak of his guilt when speaking of his conversion. In fact he expressly declared that his persecution was done in ignorance and in unbelief. "Who was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious: but I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief" (1 Tim 1:13). Clearly, the prayer of Stephen at his stoning in the presence of Paul was honoured by God. "And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge." He declared to the Philippians that he was without guilt. "Concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless" (Php 3:6). Paul was fully possessed of a deep sense of Judaic righteousness when pursuing the Christians. This is wholly consistent with the facts.

On the Damascus road Saul was told he was persecuting an exalted *Christ* and His *Church*. He knew nothing of this beforehand, and so it could not have weighed on his conscience at all. His conscience according to the law under which he was acting, was clear and fully persuaded. He was a he declared – ignorant of it! What then caused his supposed guilt induced hallucinations which came before the voice of revelation? This muddling of cause and effect would be avoided if there was a proper study of Scripture.

Acts 9:3-4. "And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven: And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?"

Acts 26:13-14. "At midday, O king, I saw in the way a light from heaven, above the brightness of the sun, shining round about me and them which journeyed with me. And when we were all fallen to the earth, I heard a voice speaking unto me..."

Saul was as unaware that in persecuting the disciples he was in fact persecuting a living Christ and His Body – the Church. To him Christ was dead and buried. His task was to purge away His remnant pestilential disciples.¹² So when the Lord spoke to him it was “Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me [His Body]. This is further demonstrated in his reply and the Lord’s answer. “And he said, who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest” (Acts 9:1-5). And, we note that it was *this* revelation and Paul’s conviction in regard to it, which was used by the Spirit of God to inspire Paul to expound the truths of Christ, His Body and His exalted headship over it. To say that all this was the product of some psychological or physiological experience is to fly in the face of the biblical facts and doctrine. Saul’s conversion was precipitated by the sovereign grace of God through a divine revelation and encounter with the exalted Man on that Damascus Road.

Finally, Paul’s commission to the Gentiles did not spring from personal guilt, but from that same divine glory that met him in grace on the Damascus road. “Whereupon, O king Agrippa, I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision: But shewed first unto them of Damascus, and at Jerusalem, and throughout all the coasts of Judaea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, and do works meet for repentance” (Acts 26:19-20).

“Where is the wise? where is the scribe? where is the disputer of this world? hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?” (1Cor 1:20).

¹² Paul did speak of persecuting Christ and the Church – but this was *after* he was converted (Acts 9:9; Phil 3:6 cf Acts 8:30).” His actions were directed against the disciples of Christ as individuals (Acts 9:1-2).